

Structural Dissociation Model

A survival strategy.

Faced with abuse and neglect, children need to find some way of surviving psychologically. Abused children make use of the brain's capacity to split into parts. There may be a 'good child' who gets on with normal life as best he or she can, and who 'disowns' the 'bad child', to whom the abuse and neglect happened, as 'not me'.

The Structural Dissociation model of personality posits splitting as a survival orientated adaptive response to the demands of a traumatic environment. Moreover, it proposes that this response is based on the left brain/right brain split that supports 'disowning' of the 'not me' or trauma related parts, and also supports the ability to function without awareness of being traumatized.

Splitting also supports the development of parts driven by animal defensives that are crucial to survival. The trauma related parts, activated by normal life stimuli, and driven by implicit trauma responses may experience threats and automatically engage in defensive behaviors such as fight, flight, freeze, submit, and cry for help.

Survival, but at a cost!

While this is a valuable survival strategy, it also comes at a cost. To keep the rejected part 'out of the way' long after the traumatic events have occurred, individuals must rely on dissociation, denial and/or self-hatred for enforcing the disconnection. In the end, they have survived trauma by disowning their most vulnerable and wounded parts of themselves.

Although the term 'parts of the personality' is a controversial concept in the mental health world, we will continue to use it. There are three reasons for doing so: first, use of the term does suggest there is a whole person with whom we are working as therapists. Second, the term is in common usage – who has not said something like, "Part of me wants an ice cream and part of me says 'no not today'". So, it's easily understood by clients at least in Western culture. Third, there is evidence that the brain develops neural networks that consist of neural pathways that consistently fire together, and that these neural systems can encode complex systems of traits or systems that represent aspects of our personalities or ways of doing being. In other words, a 'part' may be represented by one of these networks as a physical system reality in the brain of an adult.

Such neural systems can be complex with a subjective sense of identity or can be a much simpler collection of traits associated with different roles played by the individual. This is consistent with what most of us working with parts will have experienced. Some parts have a definite sense of identity and are quite elaborate in their ability to communicate, while others are much less so.

(1) van der Hart, O., Nijenhuis, E. R. S., & Steele, K. (2006). *The haunted self: Structural dissociation and the treatment of chronic traumatization*. New York: Norton:

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